

VENTURA COUNTY

Nonprofit Buys Oxnard Building for 'Justice Center' for County's Poor

Community: The group wants to share space with other agencies providing legal help and basic services.

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California Rural Legal Assistance has purchased an Oxnard building it had been renting since earlier this year, moving the provider of legal services for Ventura County's poor closer to two goals.

The purchase will help meet the organization's long-term plan of establishing a one-stop "justice center" for agencies that provide services to the poor.

It also will allow the organization to house in one building its migrant-worker legal assistance program and a newer basic services program. The two programs are currently housed in buildings about a block apart. The organization's Oxnard office broadened its services from farm worker-related aid to basic assistance last year when the federal government chose to fund it, over Channel Counties Legal Services, as the county's sole provider of legal help to the poor.

The migrant program generally has taken on issues related to farm labor and has represented large groups of workers. The basic program represents individuals on cases involving labor, housing and claims for public benefits.

The purchase of the building on A Street in downtown Oxnard also signals California Rural Legal Assistance's intention to establish roots, said its leaders.

"To me, it symbolizes a long-term presence in the community," said Santos Gomez, directing attorney of the organization's migrant services office. "We want the community to know that we are committed to try to address social injustice."

The building will be named the Cruz Reynoso Justice Center. It will be the first building anywhere to be named after the first Latino to serve on the California Supreme Court.

Naming the building after Reynoso seemed appropriate because the former justice came from a farm worker family that toiled in fields from Orange County to the Central Valley, said Jose Padilla, the group's statewide director.

"It's a great honor to have a building dedicated to justice and to the service of the community . . . named after me," said Reynoso, who is now a UC Davis Law School professor. "Those are the issues I have devoted my life to.

California Rural Legal Assistance has provided legal services to farm workers and other poor people statewide for 35 years. Its Oxnard office has provided services exclusively to farm workers for more than a decade.

The organization raised about \$60,000 to purchase the A Street building. Half the money was raised from local donors, including farm workers.

"We wanted to show that we were a part of the community and that they were a part of us," Padilla said. "How do you develop ownership if not through a project that required local funding?"

But the main funding comes from a \$650,000 loan the statewide organization took out. Padilla said the organization plans to keep raising money locally to help pay the mortgage.

The building also houses five businesses that were already tenants. The organization's migrant program will move in, and the organization will spend the next year looking for nonprofit groups or businesses to make up the rest of the justice center.

The idea is to bring together organizations that provide services "consistent with CRLA's mission to alleviate poverty and to empower communities," said Gomez. He has already begun contacting groups that might be tenants.

One example might be immigration lawyers, a service that clients often need but that the organization does not provide, Gomez said.

Padilla said the model of owning a building that functions as a one-stop legal service facility is a new endeavor for the organization. Of the buildings that house its 20 regional offices, the organization owns or co-owns five.

If the model is successful in Oxnard, it may be used at other California Rural Legal Assistance operations.

"I'm hoping that what this center does is open a dialogue with other nonprofit leaders to

plan out what are the legal needs of the community that could be served through such a center," Padilla said.

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